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ABSTRACT

Thinking skills and ethical judgment are needed in all areas of business, and instruction in these areas should be included in business communication courses. Authorities on the teaching of thinking generally agree that instructional objectives should cover creative and critical thinking skills, as well as the dispositions that enhance the use of those skills to solve problems and analyze issues. Ideally, business communication textbooks would provide the explanatory and exercise materials required to teach thinking skills and ethical judgment, but seldom do. This means that instructors who wish to include such instruction will have to develop their own supplemental materials. One approach instructors can follow is to (1) read one or more textbooks on thinking to become better acquainted with the relevant principles and approaches; (2) provide students with explanations of important principles and approaches in creative thinking, critical thinking, and ethical judgment; and (3) revise assignments, directions, and the class discussion format to emphasize thinking skills after consulting a list of thinking skills objectives. (Included is a list of thinking skills and ethics objectives adapted for business communication.) (HOD)

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TEACHING THINKING SKILLS AND ETHICS IN BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

Two important educational emphases of the 1980s are thinking skills and ethics. Although these emphases have had a number of distinguished champions for more than a century, until the late 1970s their impact on American education was modest. At that time, however, numerous business and professional organizations expressed concern over the inability of many college graduates to solve problems, analyze issues, and make decisions. This concern resulted in the formation of special educational commissions, whose widely-publicized findings became a call for educational reform.

To date, an impressive array of organizations has echoed that call. The list includes the New York State Regents, the California State Education Department, the College Board, the University/Urban Schools National Task Force, The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. Phi Delta Kappa, the

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American Association of Superintendents and Curriculum Developers, the American Federation of Teachers, the U. S. Department of Education, The National Endowment for the Humanities, and the National Council of Teachers of English.

Elsewhere I have argued for the inclusion of thinking skills objectives and ethics objectives in a wide variety of courses in every academic discipline. The thesis I will advance in these remarks, however, is more limited. It is that, for two good reasons, thinking skills and ethics deserve a special place in the business communication course.

Why Include Thinking Skills?

The first reason for including thinking skills and ethics instruction in business communication is that this course is a service course for the entire business curriculum, and thinking skills and ethical judgment are needed in all areas of business. Not long ago I conducted a database survey of business journals to determine the specific areas of business in which knowledgeable people are stressing the importance of thinking skills. I found more than 100 relevant articles. The specific areas of business represented included accounting, public administration, business law, advertising, sales, insurance, finance, industrial engineering, marketing, personnel management, real estate, public relations, and business administration.

Some would argue that the needs of a particular academic area are best met within the area rather than somewhere else. That view would have merit if thinking instruction had to be

limited to a single course. But such limitation is unnecessary. The evidence clearly suggests that most students' thinking deficiencies are serious enough that they are not likely to be overcome in a single course. If it is naive to expect writing deficiencies to be overcome in a single college course preceded by years of writing instruction, it is surely absurd to expect thinking deficiencies to be overcome more easily when students have had little or no instruction in thinking.

The second reason for including instruction in thinking skills and ethics in business communication is that there is a close connection between thought and expression--so close, in fact, that some authorities believe that many of the problems that have traditionally been considered language deficiencies are, in fact, cognitive deficiencies. For example, Ina V. S. Mullis, of the Educational Testing Service, offers this conclusion of the National Assessment of Educational Progress data on writing:

> Although many students demonstrate rudimentary or marginal communications skills, relatively few are capable of expressing themselves fully in writing. Most display a general grasp of written conventions and can communicate outlines of thoughts and ideas. However, few appear able to elaborate on ideas or support their arguments. They just do not seem able to pursue an idea or sustain a topic long enough to produce the type of extended text containing hierarchical structures that is necessary to communicate relationships or expand a kernel notion into a thoughtful

discussion. 1

It would be a mistake to regard such thinking deficiencies as reflecting only a lack of reasoning skill. As Harvard's David Perkins has demonstrated, though most students have difficulty evaluating ideas, they often have even greater difficulty producing ideas. 2

The connection between thought and expression was honored in classical rhetoric, but in time came to be largely ignored. One of the most important advances in modern rhetoric, in fact, has been recognition of the harmful consequences of Petrus Ramus' sixteenth-century decision to shift consideration of <u>invention</u> from rhetoric to logic. That decision ultimately removed considerations of substance from rhetoric, leaving it to focus solely on organization and style. Contemporary process rhetorics are solving this problem by giving increased attention to creative and critical thinking in the pre-writing and revision stages of the composition process. Business communication instruction would profit by adopting this process approach.

Why Include Ethics Instruction?

Both these reasons support the addition of thinking skills instruction to business communication. But why add ethics instruction? First, let me define my term. "Ethics instruction," as I am using it, does not mean lecturing on the history of ethics or discussing the works of great ethicists. Rather, it means providing students guided practice in making ethical judgments about issues relevant to business

communication. Such instruction is obviously related to thinking skills instruction, but it includes an additional element--application of the special criteria of judgment appropriate to ethical issues.

Why should ethics instruction be included in business communication? First, because many business communication situations give rise to ethical questions that cannot be properly answered without reference to ethical principles. Secondly, because many students' responses to ethical issues are corrupted by the false notions that right and wrong are purely relative and subjective and that conscience is unaffected by the process of social conditioning. It takes more than exhortations to be ethical for students to overcome these notions and develop their capacity for moral judgment.

Objectives of Thinking/Ethics Instruction

Authorities on the teaching of thinking generally agree that instructional objectives should cover both creative and critical thinking skills and the dispositions that enhance the use of those skills to solve problems and analyze issues. Following is a list of such objectives, together with ethics objectives, adapted for business communication. 3

TO DEVELOP OR REINFORCE IN STUDENTS THE DISPOSITIONS ASSOCIATED WITH EFFECTIVE THINKING:

Interest in the sources of one's own attitudes, beliefs, and values.

Curiosity about one's own mental processes and eagerness to develop them further.

Sensitivity to problems and issues.

The desire to reason well and to base judgments on evidence.

Willingness to subject one's own ideas to scrutiny.

Willingness to entertain opposing views without reacting defensively.

A healthy argument toward argumentation.

TO DEVELOP OR REINFORCE IN STUDENTS THE HABITS AND SKILLS THAT ENHANCE THE PRODUCTION OF IDEAS:

Skill in defining problems and issues.

The ability to defer judgment.

The ability to produce many ideas with facility.

The ability to shift perspectives while producing ideas.

TO DEVELOP OR REINFORCE IN STUDENTS THE HABITS AND SKILLS THAT ENHANCE THE EVALUATION OF IDEAS:

Fairmindedness in evaluating issues.

The ability to make important distinctions.

Skill in recognizing and evaluating unstated assumptions.

The ability to detect fallacies (for example, illogical conclusion, overgeneralization, and oversimplification) when they occur in other people's thinking or one's own thinking.

Skill in evaluating arguments.

The ability to recognize when evidence is insufficient.

Vigilance concerning one's own tendencies to irrationality.

TO DEVELOP OR REINFORCE IN STUDENTS THE HABIT OF APPLYING THE DISPOSITIONS, HABITS, AND SKILLS OF EFFECTIVE THINKING TO THE JUDGMENT OF MORAL ISSUES IN LIGHT OF RELEVANT MORAL CONSIDERATIONS, SUCH AS OBLIGATIONS, IDEALS, AND CONSEQUENCES.

Teaching Materials

Ideally, business communication textbooks would provide both

the explanatory and exercise materials required to teach thinking skills and ethical judgment. Unfortunately, they do not. To begin with, most seem to have been written on the unwarranted assumption that students already know how to think effectively and need only to be exhorted to do so. (In addition, most take a product-approach rather than a process-approach; that is, they are arranged topically rather than sequentially and focus on descriptions of what the final product should look like rather than the steps to be taken in producing it.)

I recently examined five of the leading business communication textbooks to determine the extent and quality of their coverage of thinking skills and ethics.4 Each of these books is over five hundred pages in length, and most devote some space, often one or more chapters, to topics of contemporary importance such as office technology and international business communication. Yet none offered comparable space to either thinking or ethics.

To be more specific, I consulted each book's index using appropriate descriptors: for thinking skills, creative thinking, critical thinking, imagination, judgment, logic, originality, and reasoning; for ethics, ethics, integrity, honesty, and morality. My findings were as follows:

THINKING SKILLS

The first book contains no references to any of the descriptors.

The second book appears to devote over 50 pages to thinking skills. However, most of this treatment centers on gathering and organizing data. Only two pages are devoted to drawing conclusions and avoiding errors in logic. Creative thinking is not covered.

The third book treats only one of the descriptors--imagination--devoting little over a page to the discussion, which is limited to the use of imagination as a device for choosing exact and lively words.

The fourth book contains only three paragraphs on creativity and three on judgment, the latter confined to an explanation of the error of judging hastily.

The fifth book contains less than half a page on judgment, advising students to "avoid expressions of surprise, doubt, and judgment [sic]."

ETHICS

The first book devotes three pages to ethics under the heading "Apply Integrity and Ethics" (in addition to several scattered references). The second book contains two references to ethics, totalling less than a page. Moreover, one of the references conveys the lamentable implication that the role of ethics in communication is to impress the reader. The passage reads as follows: "Ethical appeal: Make the reader respect your honesty and fairness. Many people are impressed by such statements as 'We believe in providing

only the best products and service.'"5

The third, fourth, and fifth books contain no references to the subject of ethics.

The lack of thinking skills materials and ethics materials in business communication textbooks means that instructors who wish to include such instruction in their courses will have to develop their own supplemental materials. Although space limitations preclude detailed discussion of that challenge here, it is possible to outline a basic approach instructors can follow.

Step 1: Read one or more textbooks on thinking to become better acquainted with the relevant principles and approaches. Be sure to cover both creative and critical thinking. Consider which of the exercises in those books might be adapted to business communication. (Repeat this procedure with one or more ethics or business ethics textbooks.)

Step 2: Provide students with explanations of important principles and approaches in creative thinking, critical thinking, and ethical judgment.

Step 3: Examine all the writing and speaking assignments now included in your course, including both "homemade" and commercial assignments. Consulting the list of thinking skills objectives included in this article, determine which attitudes and skills students must possess in order to do each assignment effectively. Finally, revise your assignment directions and

class discussion format to emphasize thinking skills.

Including thinking skills and ethics instruction in business communication requires an initial investment of time and effort, but the benefits more than justify that investment. The course takes on a new, vital liberal arts dimension that makes the instructor's job more enjoyable. Students gain an opportunity to improve not only the organization and style of their business writing, but also its substance. And the needs of the business curriculum, as well as of the business community, are more effectively met.

NOTES

1 "What Do NAEP Results Tell Us About Students' Higher Order Thinking Abilities?" unpublished article, 1981.

2 Presentation at Second International Conference on Critical Thinking and Moral Critique, Sonoma State University, Rohnert Park, California, July 9 - 13, 1984.

3 This list of objectives is adapted from a list of thinking objectives in the author's Teaching Thinking Across the Curriculum: A Guide for Educators, scheduled for publication by Harper & Row in January, 1987.

4 The five texts are: 1) Herta A. Murphy and Herbert W. Hildebrandt, Effective Business Communication, 4th edition, 1984

(McGraw-Hill); 2) Courtland L. Bovee and John V. Thill, Business Communication Today, 1986 (Random House); 3) Norman B. Sigband, Communication for Management and Business, 3rd edition, 1982 (Scott-Foresman); 4) Raymond V. Lesikar, Business Communication: Theory and Application, 5th edition, 1984 (Irwin); 5) William C. Himstreet and Wayne Murlin Baty, Business Communications, 7th edition, 1984 (Kent). All references to "first book," "second book," etc. refer to this ordering.

5 Bovee and Thill, 105.